The Epistle of the Báb on the Mi'rāj of the Prophet Muhammad, Addressed to Mīrzá Ḥasan Nūrī

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Introduction and background:

The Mi'rāj, the Ascension of the Prophet Muḥammad to the celestial realms, has been a perennial topic of theological discourse and philosophical reflection within the Shaykhī, Bābī, and Bahā'ī movements of 19th-century Iran. Scholars such as Al-Aḥsā'ī and his disciple Siyyid Kazim Rashtī maintained that the Mi'rāj constituted a bodily ascent, albeit conceived within a complex ontological framework in which "body" did not necessarily imply the same constraints as ordinary physicality. Similarly, Muḥammad Karīm Khān Kirmānī, in his *Irshād al-ʿAvām*, rejected the possibility of a spiritualized or allegorical interpretation, asserting a literalist bodily ascension grounded in his extensive knowledge of philosophical, theological, and esoteric sciences. Bahá'u'lláh, later in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, would nuance this discourse, emphasizing that the comprehension of such exalted realities is not reserved for the learned alone, but requires spiritual insight and illumination.

While the Báb was in Isfahán in 1846, from late September to late March, He revealed a short Arabic Epistle entitled *Risālah fī Jasad al-Nabī* ("The Epistle on the Body of the Prophet"), also known as *Sharḥ Kayfiyyāt al-Mi'rāj* ("Epistle on the Circumstances of the Mi'rāj"), during one of the public gatherings held at the house of the Imám-Jum'ih (Sholeh A. Quinn, "The Mi'rāj in Select Shaykhī, Bābī, and Bahā'ī Texts," *Journal of Religion*, 2003, p. 4). This Epistle was addressed to Mīrzá Ḥasan Nūrī, an Ishrāqī thinker of the Mulla Ṣadrā philosophical tradition.

In this Epistle, the Báb presents existence as structured in three principal stations: transcendental time (*Sarmadī*), deriving from the Divine Essence and unbounded in beginning or end; eternal time (*Dahr*), arising from Divine knowledge and encompassing the immaterial, abstract entities; and temporal time (*Zamān*), which is limited by beginning and end and realized through the motion of the celestial spheres. Within this cosmological framework, the Prophet's simultaneous presence in multiple locations refers not to a material, elemental body but to a symbolic or spiritual body (*Hur qalyā*),[2] a metaphysical reality

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[2] *Hur qalyā* (هورقلیا), a term employed extensively by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī (d. 1241/1826), denotes an intermediate ontological realm situated between the elemental, sensible world and the purely spiritual domains. In his writings, Shaykh Aḥmad distinguishes between two bodies: the *elemental body* (*al-jism al-ʿunṣurī*), subject to material composition and dissolution, and a subtle, non-elemental body, often described as *Hur qalyā'ī*, which subsists in this intermediate realm and constitutes the mode of embodiment, perception, and personal identity after death and at the resurrection. This latter body, while non-corporeal in the ordinary sense, nonetheless possesses form and extension appropriate to the imaginal world. Although Shaykh Aḥmad's systematic deployment of *Hur qalyā* is distinctive—particularly in relation to eschatology and

existing beyond temporal constraints. While the physical body participates in contingent time, the essential realities of existence remain independent of temporal limitations. Consequently, the ordinary intellect, confined to temporal and material relations, cannot fully apprehend the nature of such exalted stations, including the Mi'rāj.

The Epistle further presents a deeply sophisticated theological perspective that navigates between literalist and spiritualized understandings. It commences with an invocation: "Praise be to God, Who hath manifested Himself unto all contingent beings through the appearance of His Will, thereby and for its sake," situating the discourse within a metaphysical framework in which all contingent realities (*mumkināt*) are made aware of God's ordinances through the interplay of divine action (*maqāmāt al-fi'l*) and manifestations of receptivity (*ẓuhūrāt al-infi'āl*). Here, the Báb emphasizes the cosmic and universal significance of divine decrees, framing the Mi'rāj within the broader ontological structure of existence.

The central question addressed in the Epistle concerns the seeming paradox of the Prophet's corporeal presence during the Mi'rāj: "how the body of the Prophet, may the blessings of God be upon Him and His kindred, could, in one and the same time and in one and the same place, be simultaneously manifest in all the regions of existence, the seen and the unseen." This formulation directly engages the traditional tension in Shi'ite exegesis between the physicality of the Prophet's body and the metaphysical omnipresence of the Prophet's reality. By employing the terminology of "men of understanding" (*rijāl al-a'rāf*), the Báb signals the epistemic limitations inherent in ordinary perception, stressing that the comprehension of such exalted stations is contingent upon intimate knowledge of the "Command which lieth between the two Commands," a cryptic reference to the inner mechanics of divine ordination and the Mystery of Destiny (*sirr al-qadr*).

Philosophically, the Epistle elucidates the Prophet's station, along with His successors (*awṣiyā'*), as placed at the apex of Sarmad, reflecting both the primordial origin and the inexhaustible effusion of divine reality. The Epistle emphasizes that, while God hath appointed a beginning for these realities in His own Self, no finality exists in the realm of manifestation, for the Divine effusion in contingent reality is inexhaustible. Within this metaphysical schema, the Prophet's corporeal presence is not constrained by ordinary spatiotemporal laws: although physically located in the House of Ḥumayrā' on the Night of Ascension, consensus affirms that he simultaneously occupied the heavens, the various paradises, and the two luminous orbs (the Sun and the Moon). This is not mere mystical metaphor but an ontological claim: the Prophet's body, like divine essence, participates fully in the law of contingent existence while remaining unrestricted by its usual limitations.

The Báb's treatment of the Mi'rāj is thus carefully calibrated. He asserts the undeniable presence of the Prophet's body across multiple realms while simultaneously acknowledging the cognitive incapacity of ordinary intellects to fully apprehend this station. As he writes: "so much so that certain souls acknowledged their lack of knowledge of the true nature of the

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the Imam's mode of existence during the Occultation—the conceptual foundations of this notion derive from earlier Islamic philosophical and mystical traditions, most notably the Illuminationist (Ishrāqī) cosmology of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), who articulated an intermediate *world of imaginal forms* (*'ālam al-mithāl*) mediating between the corporeal and the intelligible.

station of the Body." The Epistle stresses that full comprehension requires spiritual insight into the divine ordination as it manifests in contingent realities, a knowledge which can be approached only through gnosis (*'irfān*) and understanding of the Command in its stations of manifestation (*maqāmāt al-ẓuhūr*).

Importantly, the Epistle demonstrates the Báb's nuanced position relative to his contemporaries. Unlike literalist interpreters such as Karīm Khān, who confined the Mi'rāj to a bodily ascent understandable through rational and textual learning, the Báb situates the event within a hierarchical cosmology that accommodates both corporeal presence and omnipresence, blending the physical and metaphysical in a seamless ontological framework. This approach anticipates Bahá'u'lláh's later assertion in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* that comprehension of exalted spiritual realities transcends conventional scholarship and requires inner illumination.

In sum, the Epistle reveals that, according to the Báb, the Mi'rāj of the Prophet Muḥammad was both bodily and transcendent. The body of the Prophet participates fully in contingent existence while simultaneously being co-extensive with multiple realms of manifestation, reflecting the universal laws of divine action and the inexhaustible effusion of the Divine Will. The Báb carefully preserves the veracity of physical reality while elevating it to a metaphysical and universal scale, thereby reconciling the apparent contradictions debated by scholars of His time and establishing a framework in which spiritual insight is indispensable to the understanding of prophetic realities.

This provisional translation—based on a manuscript copy preserved in the Iran National Bahá'í Archives (INBA), Vol. 53, pp. 402-403—is attentive to the nuances of the original Arabic, seeks to render faithfully both the letter and spirit of the Báb's words, preserving the elevated diction, scriptural tone, and profound theological insight characteristic of His revelation.

Thus, doth the Báb reveal:

" In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Praise be to God, Who hath manifested Himself unto all contingent beings through the appearance of His Will, thereby and for its sake, that all contingent beings might come to recognize what God hath ordained in the realities of their essential being, in the stations of action, and in the manifestations of receptivity; until every station hath recognized itself and perceived the decree of its Origin in whatsoever God hath ordained for it in all its affairs, by a dispensation whose course hath no limit in Him. That it may testify, in the station of contingent existence, to what God Himself hath testified for His creatures: that there is no God but Him, the Mighty, the Most Exalted.

And now, concerning what his exalted eminence hath asked, in the station of address, regarding the elucidation of a difficulty well known among the men of understanding—namely, how the Body of the Prophet, may the blessings of God be upon Him and His kindred, could, in one and the same time and in one and the same place, be simultaneously manifest in all the regions of existence, the seen and the unseen.

Whereas the Truth hath allowed no one any path to the gnosis of that exalted station save through the knowledge of the Command which lieth between the two Commands,[3] which is the Mystery of Destiny; for all things are endowed with three , among them the degree of Sarmad, transcendental time, which is the station of Divine Action. God hath appointed for it a beginning in His Own Self, which, in certain stations, We express as pre-eternity.

And God hath not appointed for it any end in the station of manifestation, for the Divine effusion, on the level of existence, knoweth no exhaustion.

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[3] The expression "the Command which lieth between the two Commands" (*al-amr bayn al-amrayn*) is employed in this Epistle within a precise metaphysical framework articulated by the Báb, wherein existence is ordered according to three principal stations: Sarmad, the transcendent and timeless station pertaining to the Divine Essence; Dahr, the eternal realm issuing from Divine knowledge and decree; and Zamān, the domain of temporal succession and contingent being. The "Command between the two Commands" corresponds to the intermediate degree of Dahr, which stands between the absolute transcendence of Sarmad and the conditioned realm of Zamān. It is within this eternal, non-temporal plane that the realities of the Manifestations of God subsist, simultaneously oriented toward the Divine Source and toward the world of creation. From this vantage, the translation of the Divine Will into determinate forms becomes intelligible, without recourse to temporal limitation or material causation. The Báb thus indicates that the comprehension of exalted realities—such as the Prophet Muḥammad's presence beyond ordinary spatiotemporal constraints during the Miʿrāj—depends upon recognition of this intermediary degree of existence, wherein divine ordination and created manifestation are harmoniously conjoined. Ordinary reason, bound to temporal relations, is incapable of apprehending this station, for its reality belongs to an eternal order lying between pure transcendence and the contingent realm of temporal existence—an ontological mediation through which the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of divine Manifestation are rendered intelligible. Moreover, the Arabic term *al-amr* is here rendered as "Command", in accordance with its established usage in the authoritative English translations of Bahā'ī scripture, particularly those of Shoghi Effendi, where the term denotes a metaphysical principle of divine ordination rather than a literal injunction or verbal order. In this Epistle, *al-amr* signifies the governing divine reality through which the Will of God is made operative within existence, and knowledge of *al-amr bayn al-amrayn* is presented as a prerequisite for apprehending exalted stations beyond the reach of ordinary reason. Alternative renderings such as "cause," "matter," or "decree" would either obscure this ontological function or introduce unintended philosophical connotations not warranted by the context.

And this is the station of Muḥammad and of his successors, may the blessings of God be upon them, wherein no one hath power to take unto himself aught of the decree of that station.

Among them is also the station of eternal time, which, in the knowledge of God, hath its beginning from the station of transcendental time and its consummation in the station of interiority. And this is the station of all other contingent beings, deriving from the degrees of the Essences in the worlds of the immaterial.

And among them is the station of temporal time, for which God hath appointed a limit, both in its beginning and in its consummation, and which is realized through the course of the celestial spheres.

And when the ordinance of these stations is established, there is no doubt that the Heart, in the first station, perceiveth that the thing itself possesseth all stations as abiding realities, and that all manifestations are expressive thereof. Or the Universal Body, which God hath made the bearer of the loci of action, proclaimeth the station of its own Essence, which pointeth unto the station of Transcendental Time.

Inasmuch as the Body of the Prophet, on the Night of Ascension, though it was in the House of Ḥamīrā'[4] *according to what hath been transmitted in the reports, was nevertheless established by consensus to have been in the heavens, in the degrees of Paradise, and in the two luminous orbs (the Sun and the Moon); for even as nothing veileth His Essence in the worlds of contingency, so likewise is the same decree in His Body.*

And since the intellects are powerless to behold the Command between the two Commands and the ordinance of transcendental time in the station of certitude, therefore whatsoever was spoken in the assembly the intellect refrained from, by reason of its limitation.

So much so that certain souls acknowledged their lack of knowledge of the true nature of the station of the Body.

And if God so willed and desired, I would assuredly expound the reality of this matter through the secret of its actuality and the consummate decree pertaining to its station,
that the ordinance might be known by him who hath known the Command in the stations of the Divine Theophany, and that he might not be veiled from the beholding of the Light of the Unseen, even if he be veiled from the sphere of nearness to the Divine Presence.

And at that station the Pen hath been taken from flowing; and unto God returneth the authority of utterance, in the beginning and in the return. And glorified be God, the Lord of the Throne, above all that they attribute unto Him. And peace be upon the Messengers, and praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds."

[4] The "House of Ḥamīrā'" (Bayt Ḥamīrā'), located in Mecca near the Ka'bah, was the residence of Umm Hani, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. It is traditionally regarded as the earthly point from which the Prophet's Night Journey (Isra) and Ascension (Mi'rāj) commenced. Its mention in the Epistle situates the narrative within a historically and spiritually significant locale.

The Epistle of the Báb on the Mi‘rāj of the Prophet Muhammad, Addressed to Mīrzá Ḥasan Nūrī (According to a Typed Copy of the Manuscript)

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

الحمد لله الذي تجلي للممكنات بظهور المشيه لها بها ليعرفن كل الممكنات ما جعل الله في حقايق ذاتيات كينونياتهم من مقامات الفعل و ظهورات الانفعال حتي قد علم كل مقام نفسه و عرف حكم مبدئه فيما قدر الله له في كل شانه بما لانهاية له به اليه ليشهد في مقام الامكان بما شهد الله لنفسه لخلقه بانه لا اله الا هو العزيز المتعال و بعد لما سئل الجناب المستطاب في مقام الخطاب بيان الاشكال الذي هو معروف بين رجال الاعراف بان جسد النبي صلي الله عليه و آله كيف يمكن في زمان واحد و مكان واحد بان يحضر في جميع اصقاع الوجود من الغيب و الشهود و ان الحق لا سبيل لاحد الي عرفان تلک الرتبة السنيه الا بعلم الامر بين الامرين سر القدر لان للاشياء مراتب ثلثة فمنها رتبة السرمد و هو مقام الفعل و ان الله قد جعل له بدايه في نفسه الذي نعبر في بعض المقامات بالقدم و ما جعل الله له نهاية في مقام الظهور لعدم نفاد الفيض في رتبة الوجود و هو مقام محمد و اوصيائه صلوات الله عليهم حيث لايقدر احد ان ياخذ من حكم تلک الرتبة شيئا و منها رتبة الدهر و ان له في علم الله بدءً من مقام السرمد و ختما في مقام البطون و هو مقام ساير الممكنات من مراتب الجوهريات في عوالم المجردات و منها رتبة الزمان و ان الله قد جعل له حدا في البدء و الختم و انه يتحقق بوجود سير الافلاک و اذا ثبت حكم المراتب فلاريب ان الفواد في الرتبة الاولي يعرف بان الشيء له كان المراتب ثابتة و كل الظهورات حاكية لان الجسد الكلى الذى جعل الله حامله محال الفعل يحكى عن مقام ذاته الذي يدل على مقام السرمد لان جسد النبي في ليلة المعراج مع انه كان في بيت الحميراء بما ورد في الخبر فقد ثبت بالاجماع انه كان في السماء و مراتب الجنان و النيران لانه كما ان ذاته لايحجبه شيء في عوالم الامكان فكذلک الحكم في جسده و ان العقول لما لم يقدر ان يشاهدوا الامر بين الامرين و حكم السرمد في حكم اليقين و لذا ما قلت في المجلس ينصرف العقل عنه بحكم الحديه حتي اعترف بعض النفوس بعدم علم الواقع في رتبة الجسد و لو شاءالله و اراد لابين حقيقة هذه المسئله بسر الواقع و الحكم البالغ في مقامه ليعرف الحكم من عرف الامر في مقامات الظهور و لايحتجب عن مطالعة نور الغيوب اذا احتجب عن ساحة قرب الحضور و الي ذلک المقام قد اخذت القلم من الجريان و الي الله يرجع حكم البيان في المبدء و الاياب و سبحان الله رب العرش عما يصفون و سلام علي المرسلين و الحمد لله رب العالمين